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### The People Bomb

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# The people bomb

Ally R. Memon — Published Feb 05, 2015 06:23am

The writer is a doctoral researcher associated with a Scottish university.

INCREASING consumption and diminishing resources arising from growing population is a political and developmental challenge faced by governments the world over. Population growth is now considered among the biggest challenges of the 21st century and governments everywhere are active in devising policies that address the challenge in order to avoid future threats such as famine and extremism arising from poverty.

Pakistan's long-term problem of rapid population growth poses a threat to multiple sectors, including food security and public welfare provision. As it is, over 60pc of Pakistan's population is facing food insecurity with malnutrition a common condition. While population growth is slowing down across the developed world and in certain developing countries, that is not so in Pakistan's case. Since the year 2000 alone, the country's population has increased by 34pc. Certainly, one must account for refugees and displaced persons in this population surge but this does not absolve the government of the consumption strain and resource burden placed by overpopulation.

For a country that started out with a population of 33 million in 1947, we are now the fifth most populous nation in the world with an estimated 182 million population. If the current population growth rate is sustained, we will become the world's fourth most populous country by 2030, exceeding 242 million.

Successive governments have struggled to provide food, health and education to an economically deprived people. There is already a perceptible strain on resources, infrastructure and services in cities like Karachi and Lahore given unplanned expansion and speedy urbanisation. Rapid population growth clubbed with the inability to improve literacy levels and public health provision are a recipe certain to push Pakistan's rankings lower on the poverty index.

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## The youth bulge will actually burden the economy.

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It is a fallacy that Pakistan's future challenges will be resolved by tapping into its large youth population, for this segment will actually burden the economy. In the last two decades alone, Pakistan's workforce has doubled to 60 million which means that the labour market will need to create three million jobs a year for these new entrants.

Ingenious programmes such as the Prime Minister's Youth Loan Scheme are certainly no solution. Given the increasing youth bulge, it will require Pakistan to maintain a GDP growth rate of 8pc over the coming decades in order to employ this large and growing segment of the population. However, Pakistan's GDP has barely grown by 3.5pc in the last five years. This, combined with a woefully stagnant education budget, will likely lead to fewer opportunities for education and mass unemployment among the youth of this country. One fears the possibility that this will breed more intolerance and extremism among the idle young.

Further, population growth should be a prime concern where governance is concerned because the changes to the country's demographics will adversely affect economic and agricultural policies and for assessing growth and development. We see efforts such as the National Assembly debate of June 19, 2014 which outlined the granting of Rs1 billion plus to the federal government to meet expenditure regarding national food security and research in response to an annual 2pc population increase.

But despite these actions, the elephant remains in the room. Such fiscal budget measures do not solve the population growth problem at hand; they serve to merely postpone and amplify it. Moreover, a national population census has not been conducted since 1998 which would supply data that can be used to formulate reliable planning policies. A focused and evidence-based national policy on population and development thus seems to be missing. If population growth is not managed, resources will continue to be stretched and public service delivery on all fronts including energy, food subsidies, education and health will not keep up with demand.

Already there are acute pressures on public services due to an excessively large population base. Public health services are hampered when burgeoning populations need state-funded health provision, for that stretches the resources of delivery outlets such as hospitals and immunisation programme centres and escalates budgetary pressures for the health authorities. Even with a labour surplus of medical professionals in the market, there are not enough organisations to employ them. Mind you, this does not excuse successive governments of the fact that public health spending is laggard and that they must invest more in building public health service capacity.

Last but not least, Pakistan's water shortage crises for both consumption and agriculture purposes are further aggravated by the population growth. Potential solutions lie in committing public funding to the problem and drafting informed policies and effective interventions. It can only be the government and its leaders that take up this mandate in the realisation that population growth is a very real threat to Pakistan.

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